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ABSTRACT

Any discussion of English as a Second Language (ESL) literacy should address three critical areas: who the learners are, what is to be taught, and how the literacy skills are to be taught. Three distinct groups of students can be classified as "non-literate" in their own language: pre-literates, illiterates, and semi-literates. Two approaches are commonly used to define the content of a literacy class. With the audiolingual approach, the purpose of the ESL literacy/reading practice is to teach students to read all the English they already know orally. The purpose of the functional approach is to teach students to read the language they need to comprehend written language. An ESL teacher can use three activities to determine essential language: observe the community, ask students, and ask intermediate and advanced students. The sight word approach has proved the most successful teaching method in the literacy class. An effective literacy lesson using this approach consists of six steps: teach the language orally, introduce the written form, provide clues for students to remember the words, have students demonstrate word recognition, have students demonstrate comprehension of written words, and assign students a task in which they "read" the words in a real situation. (YLB)

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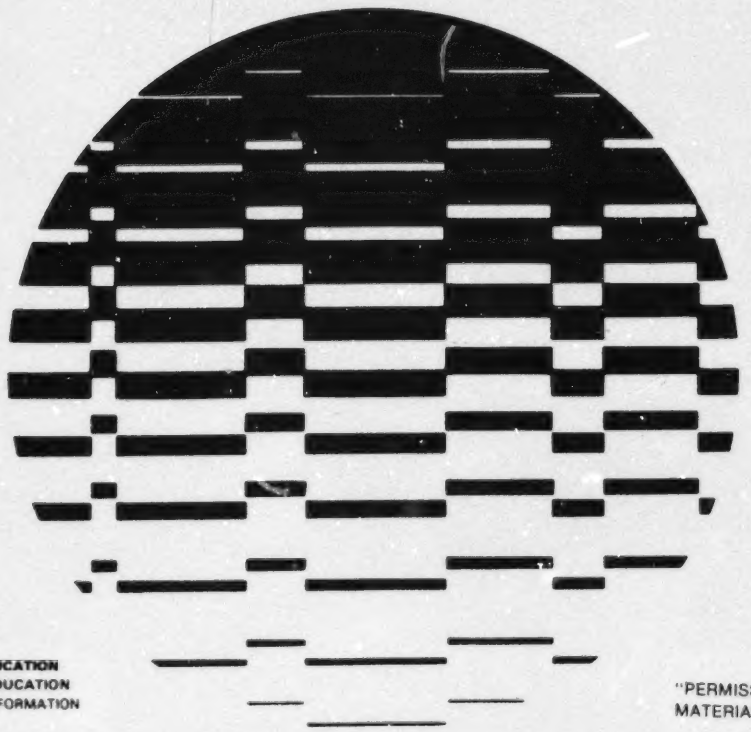

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BASIC ESL LITERACY FOR THE NON-LITERATE STUDENT

by Linda G. Mrowicki

The teaching of literacy has long been a major interest and concern of ESL practitioners. Any discussion of ESL literacy should address these critical areas: WHO the learners are, WHAT is to be taught, and HOW the literacy skills are to be taught.

WHO ARE THE LEARNERS?

In terms of ESL literacy, there are three distinct groups of students who can be classified as "non-literate" in their own language:

> Pre-literates are learners who are unable to read and write their own language and who come from a culture in which literacy is rare or non-existent.
>
> Illiterates are learners who are not able to read or write their own language but who come from a culture in which literacy is common.
>
> Semi-literates are learners who are not able to read or write their own language beyond an elementary level (Non-literate ESL Adult Students, 1981).

An additional variable that affects the teaching of literacy is the type of writing system a student is familiar with. Adults who are literate in a non-Roman alphabet will need to become familiar with the Roman alphabet.

These different groups of students often have distinguishing characteristics according to their entry point in the instruction, learning rate, motivation, or self-image (Bright, et al., 1982). Because they already have the concept of reading, the semi-literate and illiterate students are likely to progress faster that the pre-literate ones. The semi-literate may

progress the fastest because they are also familiar with a writing system.

For pre-literates and illiterates the starting point in the literacy class is visual discrimination of shapes, letters, and words. For semi-literates who are not familiar with the Roman alphabet, the starting point is visual discrimination of letters--not necessarily shapes. (For assessment suggestions, the reader is advised to refer to An ESL Literacy Resource Guide, by Jeffery P. Bright et al., 1982.)

WHAT SHOULD BE TAUGHT?

There are two approaches that are commonly used to define the content of a literacy class: the audio-lingual approach and the functional approach. With the audio-lingual approach, the purpose of the ESL literacy/reading practice is to teach students to read all the English they already know orally. The usual procedure is for students to "learn" a dialogue orally and then to "read" it. While it may be easy to teach students to say "Hello, how are you? Fine, thank you," it is quite another thing to teach such a dialogue to non-literates in its written form. This is especially true for pre-literates who may have never even held a pencil!

The purpose of the functional approach, on the other hand, is to teach students to read the language they need to read, that is, to provide students with sufficient skills to comprehend the written language they encounter in their daily lives. The functional approach to language teaching identifies the communication functions that students will use--identifying

oneself, requesting information, apologizing, warning, etc. Next, it identifies the language used in the four skill areas--listening, speaking, reading, and writing. For example, for the function of self-identification, the oral part of the lesson consists of teaching students to understand the question "What's your name (first, last)?" and to respond appropriately. The literacy section of such a lesson teaches students to read "NAME, FIRST, LAST" and to write their own names. Such a limited focus enables students to read what they need to read when filling out forms, which is an achievable task for the non-literate. Once the students have developed the concept that reading conveys meaning and have acquired the skills to comprehend "survival" English, they are ready to learn to read all the English that they know orally.

When using the functional approach, the teacher needs to examine closely the students' present and potential daily activities in order to determine what English the students need to read and write. An analysis of the students' contact points with the community is a critical part of learning what types of language will be demanded of them. There are three activities an ESL teacher can use to determine such language.

1. Observe the community.

   * What signs do you or your students see (in the school building, on the street, in local stores, in their apartment buildings)?

   * What written information are students exposed to (bills, shopping receipts, public aid checks, grocery ads)?

* What forms do students have to fill out (job applications, mail-order forms, school registration)?

2. Ask your students what they need to read. (If you do not speak the students' native language, ask a bilingual aide or an advanced-level student to assist you.)

   * Ask your students to bring to class examples of written materials they need to read (forms from work, notices from the landlord, product instructions).

   * As an outside class activity, ask students to look for signs, copy the English on a piece of paper, and bring it to class. This will tell you what students are seeing and what they should be "reading."

   * If students cannot articulate what they need, ask them to describe their daily routine to you. The situations they are involved in (such as shopping or taking the bus) are sources of written language.

3. Ask intermediate and advanced students to remember the written English they had to read when they first arrived in the community.

   * This will provide you not only with content, but also with an idea of the priority for sequencing that content (Bright, et al., 1982).

Mrowicki and Furnborough (1982) point out that if these three activities are used, the teacher will most likely find "essential" language in the following areas: numbers, money, time, personal information (name, address, phone number), forms, signs (pedestrian, traffic, safety), and general information (grocery ads, shopping receipts, bills).

A common question asked by ESL literacy teachers is "What written form should be introduced and practiced--block, upper and lower case, script, or a combination of all three?" Once again, the answer to this question can best be found by examining the

writing that students encounter. Such writing is most likely to be in block letters, since street and pedestrian signs, forms, grocery ads, labels, and other types of general information are most frequently printed in block. Therefore, block letters should be introduced and practiced first. Later, when students are familiar with block letters and begin to notice that some of the written language they encounter outside of class is written in upper and lower case (restaurant menus, for example), the teacher can introduce the study of upper and lower case letters.

HOW SHOULD LITERACY BE TAUGHT?

Once content has been defined, it is necessary to address the question of how to teach that content. The sight word approach has proved to be most successful in the literacy class. An effective literacy lesson using the sight word approach consists of six steps.

Step 1. Teach the language orally to ensure that students will understand what they will be reading.

Step 2. Introduce the written form.

Activity: Show a sign and/or write the words on the blackboard.

Step 3. Provide clues for students to remember the words.

Activity:
a) One student copies the words on the blackboard while others watch. All students then trace the words and/or copy the words on worksheets. [NOTE: The purpose of this activity is to provide a multi-sensory experience in remembering the shape of the words--NOT to learn how to spell them.]

b) Students find distinctive features of the words--word parts, numbers of letters, etc.

c) Students learn to recognize initial consonant sounds and use this skill to aid in word recognition. For example:

1. Teacher pronounces the "target word." Students listen.

2. Teacher pronounces the initial consonant sound. Students listen.

3. Teacher pronounces the initial consonant sound. Students repeat.

4. Teacher pronounces the target word. Students repeat.

5. Students list other words they have studied that begin with the same sound.

6. Teacher writes those words on the blackboard. Students copy the words.

7. Students read the words.

8. Students copy the words on worksheets.

Step 4. Have students demonstrate recognition of the words.

Activity: Provide students with worksheets that contain a list of words. Students find the target words and underline them.

Step 5. Have students demonstrate comprehension of the written words.

Activity:
a) Give students pictures and the target words written on pieces of paper. Students match the target words with the correct pictures.

b) Give students a worksheet with pictures and several word choices written next to each picture. Students circle the word that matches each picture.

c) Students read the language and give a written response, as in filling out a form, for example.

d) Students read the language and answer oral questions such as "How much are the bananas?" (for a grocery ad).

[An example of a written worksheet for steps 3-5 is shown on page 9.]

Step 6. Assign students a task in which they must "read" the target words outside of class in a real situation.

Activity:
a) Students seek out and count signs they have studied in class. For example, between class periods students count the "STOP" signs they find and report the number back to the teacher.

b) Students note where they saw these signs and report the locations to the class.

c) Students collect forms and written information, such as grocery ads or sales receipts, and bring them to class.

The preceding instructional steps enable non-literate students to learn to read the information they need to read. The learners not only develop literacy skills that can be immediately applied to the real world outside of class, but also develop confidence and a sense of achievement as well. Once a certain core of "survival literacy language" is mastered, the non-literate student is ready for the next stage--learning to read all the English that he or she uses in oral communication.

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About the Author

Linda G. Mrowicki has been in the field of ESL for 12 years as a teacher, writer, teacher-trainer, and consultant. She is a co-author of A New Start and is currently an ESL consultant at Northwest Educational Cooperative in Arlington Heights, Illinois.

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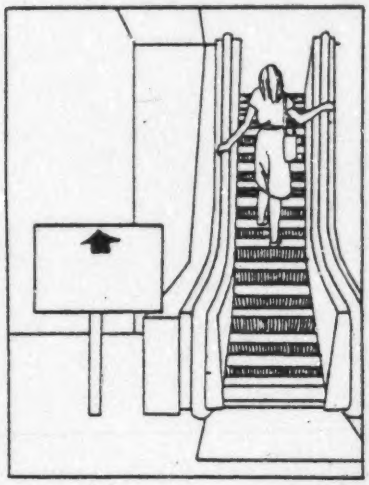


READ. TRACE. COPY.

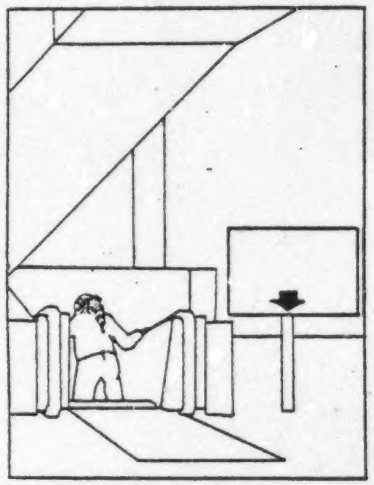
UP

UP

UP

_____

NUMBER OF LETTERS: ___



READ. TRACE. COPY.

DOWN

DOWN

DOWN

_____

NUMBER OF LETTERS: ___

WRITE WORDS WITH D.

DOWN

D _____

D _____

D _____

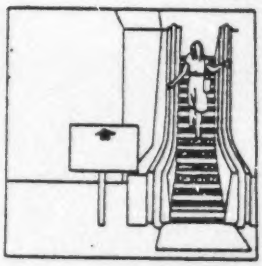
D _____

CIRCLE UP. UNDERLINE DOWN.

UP	DOWN	DOWN	UP
DOWN	DOWN	DOWN	UP

READ. CIRCLE THE CORRECT WORDS.

1



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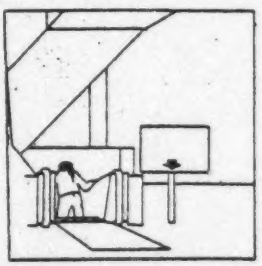

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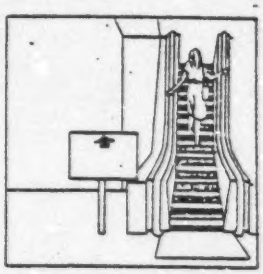
3



UP DOWN

Source: A New Start, Mrowicki and Furnborough, Heinemann Educational Books, Inc 1982